

The Dangerfield defense: Syracuse's zone earns respect in win over California

By Mike Waters / The Post-Standard

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New York— The steam nearly spouted from Jim Boeheim's ears at the question.

The Syracuse Orange had just stifled the California Golden Bears, who led the nation in 3-point shooting last season, with Boeheim's trademark 2-3 zone defense. The defense that teams like California supposedly exploit.

But Syracuse's zone stymied Cal.

The Orange held the Golden Bears to 6-of-20 shooting from 3-point range as Syracuse ran away with a stunningly easy 95-73 victory over the nation's 13th-ranked team in the semifinals of the 2K Sports Classic here at Madison Square Garden on Thursday night.

But the question that steamed Boeheim never mentioned the Orange's 2-3 zone. Instead, a reporter asked Boeheim if Cal's shooters had experienced an off night or perhaps crumbled under the pressure of playing at the World's Most Famous Arena on national TV.

"I don't think anybody has an off night," Boeheim said. "I think you have to force people to have off nights."

Syracuse did just that to the Golden Bears.

California made just 1 of 8 from 3-point range in the second half of

Thursday's game and its

leading shooter, senior Patrick Christopher, went 0-for-7 beyond the arc.

Tonight:

Syracuse vs. North Carolina
2K Sports Classic final
Madison Square Garden
7 p.m. on ESPN2



Dennis Nett / The Post-Standard

Syracuse forward Wes Johnson, right, gets one of his six blocked shots during the Orange's 95-73 win over California on Thursday at Madison Square Garden.

"Our zone is designed to be effective against 3-point shots," Boeheim said. "A lot of people think we are supposed to be playing man-to-man against a good-shooting team. What they don't understand is that Cal shot 43 percent last year from the 3-point line against man-to-man, so it obviously didn't work."

Syracuse's size and movement in the zone keyed the Orange's defensive effort. Syracuse closed out on Cal's perimeter shooters, but also swarmed around Cal's inside players. Syracuse blocked nine shots in the game.

"In the first half, I thought there were probably five occasions where we got to the basket that we could have had a score or got to the foul line," Cal coach Mike Montgomery said, "and, instead, we got a shot blocked. And that takes a little wind out of your sails."

Syracuse (3-0) will now play in tonight's championship against No. 6 North Carolina.

Cal guard Jerome Randle scored a game-high 25 points. He went 5-for-9 from 3-point range. But the rest of the Golden Bears were a combined 1-for-11 from beyond the arc.

"We knew they had shooters," Syracuse sophomore Kris Joseph said. "That was our main focus. We knew we had to close out quick and still get back inside on defense."

On the other end of the court, Syracuse got the shots it wanted.

The Orange made 57 percent of its shots, connecting on 36 of 63 field-goal attempts. In the second half, Syracuse made 21 of 33 shots — 63.6 percent.

Sophomore guard Scoop Jardine led the Orange with 22 points and six assists. Wes Johnson added 17 points and 11 rebounds.

But Cal's inability to contend with Syracuse's inside tandem of Arinze Onuaku (12 points) and Rick Jackson (eight points) opened up the court for Syracuse's shooters.

"I think we are starting to learn offensively how to work with our big guys," Boeheim said. "We haven't really done that the last couple of years. We've been perimeter-oriented. Sometimes we still get thinking that way. We've got to get the ball down inside a little bit better."

California did have to play without one of its best shooters, 6-foot-6 senior Theo Robertson, who had an injured foot.

Robertson's absence hardly seemed to matter, though, as the Orange extended its lead to 44-33 at halftime and as many as 24 points in the second half.

Syracuse's size made the zone seem like it extended from sideline to sideline.

"It's the same zone as always, we're just a lot longer," Onuaku said. "I feel like we're being more active in the zone. If we're active, we can beat a lot of people."

Onuaku said the SU players knew they had to put a hand in the faces of the Cal shooters.

"We knew what they love to do," Onuaku said. "That was the emphasis tonight."